

## Spatial Planning for Territorial Cohesion: Linking the Urban and Rural Domains



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### Introduction

The *European Spatial Development Perspective* (ESDP) (1999) and the *Third Report on Economic and Social Cohesion A New Partnership for Cohesion* (2004) have firmly established the central role of spatial planning and spatial development strategies in achieving the fundamental objectives of economic and social cohesion, conservation of natural resources and cultural heritage, and more balanced competitiveness of the EU territory. The concept of territorial cohesion features prominently in the draft Constitution and in the Cohesion report where it is recognised as a concept that goes beyond the notion of economic and social cohesion. In policy terms the objective of territorial cohesion is defined as helping to achieve a more balanced development by reducing existing disparities, preventing territorial imbalances and by promoting greater coherence between both sectoral policies that have spatial impacts and regional policy. Territorial cohesion also seeks to improve territorial integration and to encourage cooperation between regions.

Promoting higher levels of interaction and cooperation between rural and urban areas is a major challenge for policies and strategies that seek to promote higher levels of territorial cohesion. This paper commences with an overview of the different types of interactions between urban and rural areas that have been identified in research on European spatial planning. It will be followed by a summary urban-rural typology map of the recently enlarged EU which will be complemented by some additional typologies that are relevant to future debates on territorial cohesion in the EU. The second part of the paper considers the changes that have occurred in rural-urban relations in Ireland since the early 1990s against a background of exceptionally high rates of economic growth and an economic context that is recognised as the most open in the world. This will be followed by an outline of the processes involved in preparing the National Spatial Strategy and an assessment of the key concepts that underpin the approach to promoting balanced regional development which explicitly includes an objective of reducing rural-urban disparities. Some general conclusions are drawn at the end.

### Urban and Rural Interactions at the European Scale

The changing role and functions of rural areas was noted in the ESDP (1999) which also included proposals for a new form of urban-rural partnership as a complement to the concept of polycentric urban development. The subsequent Study Programme on European Spatial Planning (SPESP) explored the changing context for rural-urban interactions throughout Europe. It concluded that it is no longer appropriate to consider urban and rural areas as distinct territories with distinctive relationships and cultures. They are linked to each other, contiguously and discontinuously, in all kinds of ways. The complexity of these linkages is increasing and the spatial reach of the connections is widening.

With the increasing integration of production and housing markets, as well as the growth of agritourism and second homes in the countryside, individual consumers are becoming less dependent on local markets and both rural and urban environments are themselves often treated as consumer 'products'. The traditional hierarchical structure of relationships between cities, rural towns and their surrounding countryside survives in most regions. But it is overlain by the new spatialities of production and distribution relations, the market range of firms, and many of the new service needs of citizens. New perspectives are required to account for the flexible and multi-layered geographies of the present period as these inter-relate with the particularities of local inheritances.

The final report on SPESP identified the following categories of rural-urban relationships (Nordregio2000):

- Home-work relationships which are traditionally regarded as the most intense component of rural-urban interactions and which are sometimes used to identify the extent of functional urban regions;
- Central place relationships where urban centres provide services and amenities for the population of the urban centre and its rural hinterland;
- Relationships between metropolitan areas and urban centres in rural and intermediate areas. These can occur in peri-urban areas or along inter-urban transport corridors where distinctions between urbanity and rurality are frequently blurred. This category also involves relations between metropolitan areas and small urban centres in relatively remote and predominantly rural regions where the urban centres are integrated into national or even global economic systems;
- Relationships between rural and urban enterprises that can include a wide range of enterprise support services such as financial, research, marketing, and other types of expertise;
- Rural areas as recreation and consumption spaces for urban dwellers which includes rural spaces that are within easy reach of urban centres and also high amenity rural areas that have become the focus for different forms of tourism;
- Rural areas as open spaces and suppliers of natural resources for urban areas which includes greenbelts and also those rural areas that provide resources such as water, electricity and spaces for waste management facilities; and
- Rural areas as carriers of urban infrastructure such roads, rail links, pipelines, telecommunication lines, electricity transmission networks which result in intricate networks across the European territory.

The changing nature and increasing complexity of rural-urban relations brings new opportunities and challenges for the rural world. Improvements in transport networks, increased levels of personal mobility, diffusion of new information and communication technologies and related enterprises, and new emphases on quality of life provide opportunities for population renewal and economic revival in many rural areas. However, an influx of new population can also lead to new problems for the long term rural residents such as more competitive local housing markets, threats to traditional values and lifestyles, and in some areas undesirable and unsustainable impacts on the natural environment.

More generally, there is likely to be an increasing level of car-based long distance commuting and an emergence of 'rurban' lifestyles as the distinctions between rural and urban become more blurred for an increasing share of the population.

Recently completed research for the ESPON programme by a team coordinated by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies in Helsinki University of Technology, and which includes NIRSA as a partner, has produced typologies of the different types of rural-urban interdependence across Europe. Building on previous work undertaken by the OECD, the Helsinki led team have used three sets of criteria to classify all NUTS 3 level regions of the enlarged EU plus Romania, Bulgaria and Switzerland. The criteria are, (a) population density measured as above or below the average of 107 persons per sq. km. for all countries in the study area, (b) share of landuse identified from the CORINE database as either agricultural, wilderness or artificial, and (c) share of regional population resident in Functional Urban Areas defined according to common criteria for all countries. Unfortunately, it is not possible to obtain data on rural-urban flows for all of the European regions. Therefore, it has been necessary to rely on region-specific indicators as a basis for making inferences about functional relationships.

The most satisfactory classification of NUTS 3 regions according to the criteria listed above is a typology consisting of ten classes. While some aspects of the resultant map are as expected there are some notable features. Firstly, 'wilderness' rather than agriculture is the dominant landuse category in the most peripheral regions and secondly the distribution of 'artificial' land surfaces does not always coincide with the most urbanised regions especially in some parts of eastern Europe. The typology map, including versions containing urban centres classified according to their functional rank, can be accessed at

[http://www.espon.lu/online/documentation/projects/thematic/1107/3.ir.1.1.2\\_part.1.pdf](http://www.espon.lu/online/documentation/projects/thematic/1107/3.ir.1.1.2_part.1.pdf).

For operational reasons a simplified version of the typology has been produced consisting of six classes based on the extent of urban influence (high or low) and also the extent of human intervention (summarised as high, medium or low). The resultant map displays a pronounced contrast between, on the one hand, the regions of the Pentagon (the area within a boundary linking London, Paris, Milan, Munich and Hamburg) plus northern Italy, and capital and other large city regions, and on the other hand areas of low urban influence. Within the latter category much of the territory that formed part of the former east European states exhibits higher levels of human intervention as noted above.

When the multivariate typology maps based on harmonised datasets are compared with a map of the extent of rural areas as defined by national criteria that vary between countries there are some similarities but also some very important differences. These are most evident in the UK, the Netherlands, parts of Germany and southern Italy where the estimates of rurality according to national definitions are greater than those derived from the pan European harmonised datasets.

Before leaving the European level of analysis it is appropriate to refer to two other typologies that are directly relevant to rural-urban relations. The first relates to incidence of expenditure under the CAP and the Rural Development Regulation.

The manner in which the CAP is implemented has an enormous influence on the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development in all rural areas. The CAP and the Rural Development Programmes account for approximately 50% of the Community budget and within that total approximately 90% is allocated to various types of market support measures. Analysis of the regional distribution of expenditure under the CAP has revealed that there is an inconsistency between the CAP and the objectives for territorial cohesion. While the situation has marginally improved following the introduction of direct payments and the allocation of a larger share of the resources for rural development there is still a major challenge to bring about closer alignment between agricultural and regional policy objectives. For further details see

[http://www.espon.lu/online/documentation/projects/policy\\_impact/1104/3-ir.2.1.1.pdf](http://www.espon.lu/online/documentation/projects/policy_impact/1104/3-ir.2.1.1.pdf).

Secondly, research on recent trends in European demography has produced a regional typology based on the components of population change, namely natural increase and net migration. While some of the most rural areas identified in the urban-rural typology also experience population decline due to net out-migration and a negative natural balance there are exceptions, most notably Ireland, part of southern Spain, Greece and western regions of Poland. Thus, population change which is often used as a proxy indicator of the vibrancy of rural areas and indirectly as an indicator of the intensity of rural urban relations, needs to be interpreted with caution. For more details consult

[http://www.espon.lu/online/documentation/projects/thematic/1562/3-r.1.1.4.part\\_1a.pdf](http://www.espon.lu/online/documentation/projects/thematic/1562/3-r.1.1.4.part_1a.pdf).

The pan European level analyses undertaken with NUTS 3 level data can only at best provide an overview of the variety of conditions that reflect different levels of rurality and urbanity across Europe. In fact in some instances the classification is misleading, as for example in relation to Ireland. More detailed micro level analyses are required to identify and illustrate more precisely the different types of rural urban interactions that occur in different parts of the continent. It is also necessary to take account of the local context which includes the level of economic development, institutional arrangements, plus internal and external linkages. In the remainder of the paper I consider the evidence in relation to recent trends in Ireland.

#### Urban and Rural Interactions in Ireland<sup>1</sup>

Ireland can be characterised as a country that was lagging significantly behind the core regions of Europe in economic development until the early 1990s. However, over the past decade a major transformation has occurred with Ireland now ranked second in the EU on the GDP per capita index. Other aspects relevant to the present context are the low population density (on average 23 persons per sq. km for all rural areas), the primacy of the Dublin city region with about two-fifths of the population, and the exceptionally high level of openness of the economy which is a major influence on the location of new economic activities and, therefore, on emerging trends in rural-urban interactions.

<sup>1</sup> This section draws heavily on a case study of Urban-Rural relations in Ireland prepared for the ESPON research project on Urban-Rural Relations in Europe (Walsh, J. and Meldon, J. 2004).

New types of urban-rural relations have evolved in Ireland over recent decades and especially in the period since the early 1990s. Current patterns need to be viewed against a background where almost two-fifths of the population continue to reside in rural areas. The geographical patterns of growth and decline in the rural population over recent decades display some distinctive features of particular relevance to this conference, with declines evident in the most marginal rural areas and increases confined mostly to the commuting hinterlands of the larger urban centres but also occurring in some coastal zones where there has been evidence of greater economic diversification particularly in the tourism sector.

The future of rural areas in Ireland has been the focus of much debate over recent years. In particular the strategic importance of promoting balanced regional development was established by the government as a core objective of public policy in its National Development Plan 2000-2006 published in 1999. More specifically the government's regional policy objective is "to achieve more balanced regional development between and within the two (NUTS2) regions and to develop the potential of both to contribute to the greatest possible extent to the continuing prosperity of the country..." (para 3.19, NDP 1999).

In November 2002 the government published The National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (NSS) which includes, inter alia, explicit recognition of the diversity of rural areas and places considerable emphasis on the relationships between rural and urban areas. Urban centres, from the smallest to the largest, have roles in enabling all parts of the territory of Ireland to increase their potential. This is particularly the case for the rural areas that are experiencing an on-going restructuring of their traditional economic base. Small urban centres are envisaged as having key roles in the provision of a range of public and private services for their rural hinterlands and for supporting a high quality of life for all rural residents.

Of central importance for this project is the government's White Paper on Rural Development, Ensuring the Future – A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland published in 1999. The Strategy commits the government to "providing the conditions for a meaningful and fulfilling life for all people living in rural areas and to ensuring that there will be vibrant sustainable communities,...enjoying a standard of living and a quality of life which will make them attractive communities in which to live and work" (p. 19). It also commits the government to "achieve a rural Ireland in which...rural communities will enjoy access to education, training and lifelong learning and to an adequate level of social and other services and infrastructures" (p. 19).

The Rural Strategy explicitly recognises the need for rural development to be considered as a component of regional development. The measures outlined in the Strategy in support of the objectives include proposals in relation to future settlement patterns that envisage “regional development based on a network of urban centres serving, and at the same time, dependent on a dispersed rural community in towns, villages, and the countryside in their rural hinterlands” (p. 27). Clearly, the Strategy envisaged an intensification of rural-urban interactions, which has been elaborated in more detail in the NSS.

#### Drivers of change in rural-urban relationships in Ireland

The key drivers of change in Ireland over the period from the early 1990s to the present comprise several interrelated economic and social factors that have impacted in a variety of ways on urban-rural relations. For most of the 1990s the rates of economic growth achieved in Ireland were exceptional by comparison with the experience throughout most of the developed world. While several factors have been identified as contributors to the unprecedented scale of adjustment that occurred over a short time period (Walsh, 2000), there are some that have significantly influenced the patterns and intensity of rural–urban relations. These include:

- (1) A transition to an internationally competitive economy with the highest priority in industrial policy attached to high value-added sectors such as electronics and computer hardware, pharmaceutical and health care products, and international services such as software design, financial services and telemarketing. This transition was accompanied by a shift towards a more concentrated geographical distribution of highly skilled employment, especially in Dublin.
- (2) The very rapid expansion of the economy was facilitated by a large increase in the number of persons at work which was greatly assisted by increased levels of female participation in the labour force and also by high levels of in-migration. Each of these trends marked a major departure from the historical situation where Ireland had traditionally been characterised by low female participation rates and high net out-migration for all of the twentieth century except for a short period in the 1970s.
- (3) A steep upward spiral in urban land prices together with increased levels of personal mobility and the perception of enhanced quality of life in rural areas contributed to an increased demand for housing in the countryside, which in many cases takes the form of one-off dwellings. The number of these dwellings has also increased very significantly in the more scenic rural areas as a result of a growing demand for holiday homes. Together these urban generated pressures have added another component to the rural land market that has become the basis for a new form of rural-urban relationship, where in some areas current levels of development pressures pose a significant threat to the environment.

- (4) The traditional agricultural sector has continued to decline in terms of its relative share of employment and economic output. The adjustment process has been accelerated by a combination of the effects of CAP reform measures that have rendered farming less attractive as an occupation, and also by the effects of the buoyancy of the non-farm economy. In response to the decline in traditional agricultural production, there has been an increasing reliance on either farm-based diversification or on off-farm employment to supplement rural incomes. The empirical evidence suggests that these adjustments can be facilitated more easily in those rural areas where linkages to urban centres can be established.
- (5) Another factor has been a very significant increase in consumption of leisure and tourism related services so that some rural areas have developed new roles as consumption spaces that are vitally linked to often-distant urban centres and thereby constituting another new type of rural-urban relationship.

#### Indicators and proxy measures

Unfortunately, it is difficult to directly verify many of the hypotheses concerning the changing nature of urban-rural relations outlined above due to the unavailability of appropriate data. Rather it is necessary to rely on proxy measures that attempt to capture the distribution and intensity of emerging relations.

Two approaches are utilised here. The first uses indicators derived from the census of population micro level data to construct a typology of rural areas that reflects different levels of rural-urban interaction. Changes in the types and intensity of rural-urban interactions are reflected in changes in the total population of each area type. The significance of accessibility in shaping the intensity of rural-urban relations is examined separately.

Secondly, a range of functional indicators have been assembled for all settlements with more than 5,000 inhabitants which have been used to examine deviations from the expected relationship between functional size and population size. This is particularly useful for demonstrating the functional role of small centres in sparsely settled areas.

#### Census based indicators of rural-urban relations

The spatial structure of socio-economic relations in Ireland was analysed in detail as part of the preparation of the National Spatial Strategy. Using a database of 30 demographic and other socio-economic indicators measured for 2,716 rural enumeration districts for the 1996 Census of Population a typology of rural areas was constructed. In this analysis rural areas are defined as districts that cannot be aggregated to form an urban district and which are without a town having a population of 1,500 or more and which have a density of less than 150 persons per square kilometre. The final set of indicators chosen for the analysis included six demographic measures, eight labour market indices, five measures of employment by sector, three indices of education attainment levels and social classes, three indices of the structure/performance of the farming sector and five measures of recent changes.

These indicators were selected to represent different aspects of the socio-economic geography of rural areas in an era of rapid transition (McHugh and Walsh, 2001; McHugh, 2001).

Following a two-stage multivariate statistical analysis a typology comprising six rural area types was constructed with the following descriptive labels: (a) peri-urban areas, (b) very strong rural areas, (c) strong agricultural areas undergoing adjustment, (d) structurally weak rural areas, (e) marginal areas, and (f) highly diversified rural areas. They cover 94% of the total area and include approximately 40% of the total population at an average density of 23 persons per sq. km. For a detailed description of each type see <http://www.irishspatialstrategy.ie/docs/report10.pdf>.

The peri-urban zone includes those parts of the open countryside and also those settlements with fewer than 1,500 inhabitants that have been subjected to very high levels of urban generated adjustment. These areas contain approximately one-ninth of the total population occupying one-seventh of the area of the country and have an average density of 45 persons per sq km. They have the most rapidly growing populations represented by an increase of almost 11% (96,068) between 1996 and 2002 compared with an increase of 6.7% for all rural areas. Many of the residents in the peri-urban zones are engaged in daily commuting to work in the nearby large towns and cities. The growth in population related to in-migration of commuters is reflected in county Meath where 73.5% of the increase between 1996 and 2002 was due to net in-migration of which a very significant component includes households linked to employment in Dublin. Similarly, 69% of the total increase in Galway (city and county combined) was due to net in-migration while the figure for county Clare linked to Limerick city was 66%.

The principal reason for the very rapid growth of population in the peri-urban areas is related to the cost of housing which is very strongly influenced by the land market. Many younger households are trading off between on the one hand high transport costs and lengthy journey times which impact negatively on quality of life, and on the other hand, lower house prices and a perceived better quality of life in a semi-rural environment.

Immediately beyond the peri-urban zones are the Type 2 rural areas that exhibit characteristics traditionally associated with rural areas having strong agricultural sectors and also those areas showing evidence of an above average level of transition to a non-agricultural economy. This area type includes 10 percent of the total population at an average density of 30 persons per sq. km. on almost one-fifth of the total area. Population growth in this Area Type was particularly strong in the late 1990s as more people opted for long distance commuting, especially to Dublin and the other cities.

Rural types 3, 4 and 5, account for just over half (51.6%) of the total area of the State and include only 14.4% of the total population at an average density of 15 persons per sq. km. They have a very high dependence on agriculture for employment, which was almost 40% in Area Type 3 in 1996.

Furthermore, in Area Types 4 and 5, both the structural attributes (farm size, age of farmer) and the quality of the natural resource base (land potential, climate characteristics) are very unfavourable for farming. The urban system and the transport networks in these areas are also weak. Thus there has been a long history of out-migration and population decline and consequently urban-rural linkages are less developed and less intense than in other parts of the country.

Between 1991 and 1996 each of these Area Types had a decline in population that was most pronounced in the Area Type 3 representing some formerly stronger agricultural areas where rural diversification strategies had not been as strongly implemented in the era of guaranteed high commodity price supports prior to the CAP reforms agreed in 1992. Many of the smaller urban centres in this Area Type also declined in the early 1990s partly in response to the decline in the rural economy. Between 1996 and 2002 there was a turn around in the demographic trends. However, for the entire period between 1991 and 2002 the total population increase of just over 2,000 persons in Area Types 3, 4 and 5 combined represented only one-half of one percent of the total increase for the State.

Rural Area Type 6 represents some very remote and very marginal places in the west and southwest where traditionally urban-rural linkages have been very weak, except perhaps long-distance linkages mediated through migration streams. They represent 8.4% of the total area and in 2002 they accounted for 2.5% of the total population. The places that comprise Rural Area Type 6 are mostly associated with scenic coastal and other high amenity landscapes that attract large numbers of tourists and support a distinctive socio-economic profile that is strongly orientated towards personal services and small scale high quality craft industries.

The experience of these rural places in the 1990s was very different from that of the other Rural Area Types. In many respects they comprise new consumption spaces catering for niche markets in the post-modern era. Strong linkages exist between these rural places and distant urban centres especially through tourism and immigration. Such places have higher levels of self-employment outside of agriculture and higher levels of part-time work especially for women, though the share of employment in manufacturing is very small. The demographic structure is strengthened by net in-migration, especially of people aged 25-44. For example, net in-migration between 1996 and 2002 accounted for 92% of the population increase in county Mayo in the West and for 75% of the increase in Kerry in the Southwest. Throughout the period 1991-2002, the total population of this Area Type increased by 15% compared with increases of 13.6% for aggregate urban areas and 12.8% for all peri-urban areas.

### Effects of Distance and Accessibility

The effect of distance from urban centres on variations in employment change in rural areas has been established to be statistically significant. Rural areas located within 30 kilometres of any of the five largest urban centres had significantly higher average employment growth rates between 1991 and 1996 than more distant districts. Furthermore, the average employment growth rate is significantly related to the average population size of districts.

Accessibility is a major influence on the extent and intensity of urban-rural relations. The relationship between population change and accessibility has been examined by calculating an accessibility index for every rural enumeration district. The index for each district measures the sum of the accessibility of the district to each of the urban centres with more than 5,000 persons taking account of the actual population of each urban centre and a weighted measure of the distances. The resultant map classifies the rural space into four levels of accessibility. Estimates of the level of population change for each accessibility category provide evidence of a steep gradient with increasing distance. The districts with 'high', 'very high' or 'exceptionally high' accessibility, which contained almost half (49.3%) of the rural population in 1996, accounted for 74.5% of the increase in the total rural population between 1996 and 2002. By contrast, the districts with either 'low' or 'very low' accessibility that contained 26.2% of the rural population in 1996 accounted for only 8.2% of the increase between 1996 and 2002. Analyses of employment change also confirm the significance of variations in accessibility, especially for small low density rural areas.

### Functional Analysis

A second approach to assessing the relationship between urban centres and their hinterlands is to relate the functional role of centres to their populations. Using data on 46 functions measured for each of the 57 centres with more than 5,000 persons functional indices have been calculated. When the functional index and population ranks of each centre are compared three broad categories of centres emerge. The first includes those towns where both ranks are very similar. The second category is towns with a functional rank that is significantly larger than the population rank. The towns in this category are mostly traditional local market centres of varying sizes that cater for extensive rural hinterland populations. By contrast, the third category includes those settlements that have grown rapidly due to their relative proximity to larger centres and which frequently have a restricted range of functions as their relationships to their rural hinterlands tends to be weak. Thus population size alone is not a particularly good index of the role of an urban centre in relation to its hinterland. Visit <http://www.irishspatialstrategy.ie> for further details on the functional role of urban centres in Ireland.

### Issues arising

The analysis presented above for Europe and Ireland illustrates the degree to which the broad categorisation of territories using regional level data can mask the complexity of urban-rural relationships. While land cover might suggest a predominantly rural landscape the reality is a landscape undergoing a subtle transition from rural to peri-urban with the degree of built form and rate of urbanisation to a large extent obscured by both the relatively small scale of many of the settlements that are becoming increasingly drawn into the metropolitan zone of influence, and the presence of significant numbers of one-off houses in the countryside as described previously.

Areas distant from the influence of the principal metropolitan regions appear as remote, marginal rural spaces with limited rural-urban interaction. However as illustrated above many such areas are already at risk of becoming consumption spaces for an increasingly urbanised society with tourism and holiday home development as significant activities. Policy responses need to take account of the differing perspectives and expectations of the indigenous community on the one hand and the newly arrived or in many cases temporary or transient urban population on the other.

### Policy framework

The National Spatial Strategy (NSS) provides the overarching framework for promoting balanced and sustainable regional development in Ireland. It also provides the context within which urban-rural relations will evolve. The NSS is supported by Regional Planning Guidelines for seven regions, and by city and county development plans. The Regional Planning Guidelines, which each Regional Authority is statutorily obliged to prepare, will provide the spatial framework for regional planning and regional development. Draft Guidelines have already been produced for each region and adoption of final reports is expected before the end of June 2004.

The city and county development plans provide the framework for land use planning in each city and county and are a statutory requirement. In parallel with the physical development plans each City and County Development Board has recently prepared a ten year strategy for economic, social and cultural development strategy. In future closer alignment of the physical development plans and the strategies for economic, social and cultural development will be required, and there will also be greater vertical coordination through the Regional Plans to the National Spatial Strategy which in turn will provide the spatial framework for future National Development Plans. Thus over recent years there have been a number of initiatives to put in place a spatial planning framework that is intended to facilitate both vertical and horizontal integration of actions/measures to support balanced regional development while also maintaining international economic competitiveness. The planning principles underpinning the spatial planning strategies at all levels are enshrined in the Planning and Development Act 2000 and also in the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (1997). In addition, from time to time specific Guidelines are prepared for particular types of spatial planning issues, the most recent being the Guidelines for Rural Housing (2004).

Given the centrality of the National Spatial Strategy as the framework for balanced regional development in the future, and for providing the context within which urban-rural relations will evolve, the key features of the NSS are summarised here. For more details consult <http://www.irishspatialstrategy.ie>. It should be noted that the NSS like most government policy documents had to be sensitive to the political and administrative realities that need to be accommodated in order to ensure acceptability by key stakeholders.

The central objective of the NSS is to facilitate the promotion of balanced regional development (BRD), while at the same time maintaining the competitiveness of the economy, improving the quality of life of all persons, and ensuring that the development model is sustainable.

After much analysis it was concluded that an approach based on measures to ensure equity in distributions across regions is unrealistic and unlikely to succeed. Rather, an approach that seeks to optimise the utilisation of the specific and unique potential within definable areas (including both rural and urban places) is more realistic and more likely to succeed. The manner in which the concept of BRD was defined and interpreted was a crucial issue in the formulation and ultimately in the acceptability of the strategy.

The types of economic activity in an area, the nature of its urban and rural areas, its people, skills and resources, all comprise potential for economic and social progress and development. Potential can be defined therefore, as the capacity which an area possesses for development arising from its endowment of natural resources, population, labour, economic and social capital and location relative to markets. Different areas have differing types and levels of potential. The NSS explores how the level of potential that an area is capable of sustaining can be strengthened and built upon.

Critical mass is an important concept in optimising local and regional potential. It has been defined as the size, concentration and characteristics of populations that enable a range of services and facilities to be supported and which, in turn, can attract and support higher levels of economic activity. This in turn tends to enlarge the population and so further supports a strengthening of services and facilities. Critical mass can be achieved in different ways. It will normally require a concerted effort to develop a single town or city to play a larger role and deliver benefits to its wider hinterland. Alternatively, in some areas it may involve providing a package of supports to link a number of neighbouring towns in a polycentric network in order to collectively achieve a critical level of supporting infrastructures, facilities and services. The supports required for this type of initiative are more than physical infrastructure, it will also be necessary to strengthen institutional capacity so that a shared sense of purpose based on local cooperation can be fostered.

The same level of critical mass cannot be achieved everywhere. Concentration of critical mass to achieve stronger centres and thereby the development of functionally related areas is a crucial dynamic in bringing about more balanced regional development. This involves difficult choices concerning where to concentrate resources that must be supported by a consistent strategy over the long-term.

Maintaining an on-going dynamic of development is crucially dependent on the capacity to promote and sustain a high level of innovation within regions. The extensive literature on regional innovation systems points to the importance of supportive institutional structures to nurture an innovative milieu. There is a very strong emphasis on communication structures to facilitate both formal and informal knowledge exchanges, and also on maximising the potential of local resources. Much of the international experience also suggests that local labour markets need to be large enough to cope with relatively high levels of staff turnover.

Taking account of the concepts noted above strategic roles were identified for different parts of Ireland. For the Greater Dublin Area the primary role of the NSS is to consolidate its physical size and the public transport system in order to maintain the international competitiveness of the region and thereby contribute to the overall development of Ireland. Beyond the Greater Dublin Area it is proposed that the potential of the larger urban centres in the south, southeast, west and northwest should be strengthened through the implementation of planning, landuse and transportation strategies that will, over the medium to longer term, lead to the emergence of new polycentric networks with significant levels of critical mass. The urban system in much of the midlands and southeast will need to be reinforced through inter alia new forms of cooperation, in order to achieve sufficient critical mass that will ensure the area maintains its own vitality and avoids becoming dominated by the Greater Dublin Area or the stronger urban centres to the south and west. The western areas furthest from Dublin will require sustained efforts to revitalise their economies principally through diversification into service related activities that capitalise on the existing urban centres and the richness and diversity of the natural resource base. Finally, in an all Ireland context it is proposed that opportunities for enhancing local potentials could be developed through greater emphasis on initiatives supported by more cross border cooperation.

A number of specific actions are proposed in order to achieve the NSS objectives. These include a settlement strategy, a transport framework and proposals in relation to other forms of major infrastructure (e.g., for energy and information communication technologies).

The settlement strategy recognises the vital national role of Dublin as an international Gateway in the future and it also recognises the possibilities for increased cooperation between Dublin and Belfast. The NDP in 1999 had already identified Cork, Limerick/Shannon, Galway and Waterford as additional Gateways. Over the medium to long term the NSS envisages closer links being developed between these centres through improvement of transport infrastructure and measures to foster cooperation that will lead to a much greater level of critical mass in the context of a polycentric network. The achievement of this objective will be a major challenge. As none of the Gateways identified in the NDP (with the exception of Galway) are located in the Objective One region the NSS proposes four additional Gateways:

- Dundalk (in the northeast and centrally located between Dublin and Belfast);
- Sligo (as the principal town between Galway and the new gateway in the North West);
- a new Gateway for the North West based on Letterkenny linked with Derry in Northern Ireland; and
- in the Midlands (where the current structure of the urban system suggests the need for a polycentric Gateway based on the towns of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore).

The system of Gateways will be supported by another tier of Hubs that are each linked to a Gateway. While in most cases the hubs are strategically chosen single centres there are two instances where towns will be twinned to create duo-centric hubs, Tralee-Killarney in the southwest and Castlebar-Ballina in the west.

The Gateways and Hubs will be complemented by specific roles for smaller urban centres<sup>2</sup> and also by general guidelines in relation to housing in the countryside. In order to promote balanced regional development the settlement strategy will be supported by a national transport framework that will include, (a) strategic radial corridors linking each of the Gateways to Dublin, (b) strategic linking corridors to improve interaction between the major centres, and (c) international sea and air access points. The linking corridors are vitally important to altering the current pattern of movements between centres. The proposals include a western corridor from Derry to Limerick and Cork; a southern corridor linking the seaports and airports in the southeast, southwest and Midwest; and a central spine linking the proposed Midland Gateway to Dundalk, Waterford and Rosslare.

### Conclusions

A number of conclusions relevant to the theme of this conference can be drawn from the macro level pan European analysis and the more micro level assessment of changing rural-urban relations in Ireland.

1. Urban and rural areas are no longer self-contained. The linkages between them are complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic, with different activities providing a basis for linking places to several multi-nodal spatial networks. However, the current level of theoretical understanding of the new types of urban-rural relations, and the quality of the empirical evidence, is weak. Indeed, the very concepts of rural and urban *per se* are becoming more problematic in an operational sense and there is an acute scarcity of data on direct flows and/or exchanges between rural and urban areas. There is an urgent need for further research to provide guidance for new policy directions. The ESPON research programme provides a good start at the European level. Complementary research programmes need to be supported on an on-going basis at national and regional levels. An important emphasis in such research should be on the inter-relations between economic, social, cultural, environmental and political dimensions as they unfold spatially. Without this, it will be difficult to assess how different kinds of interventions build linkages between urban and rural areas and promote sustainable and cohesive development.

2. Sectoral policy making in the absence of clearly articulated goals and strategic frameworks for spatial development can lead to outcomes that are in conflict with the basic objectives of territorial cohesion. For example, the measures used for implementing the CAP at the European scale, and the unsustainable settlement patterns that emerged in Ireland over the past decade. Similarly, horizontal policies such as those related to competition need to be more closely aligned with territorial cohesion objectives. Sectoral policies that have been shown to be in conflict with the territorial cohesion objectives need to be reviewed.

Furthermore, there needs to be a greater acknowledgement by policy makers and other key stakeholders that the populations residing in rural areas and contributing to rural development are increasingly diverse with landowners and farmers representing a diminishing minority. This changing reality needs to be more explicitly recognised in the allocation of public resources for rural development.

3. The distinctive qualities of places and the way people identify with places and spaces can be an increasingly important resource for mobilising action. The diversity of the European territory and the variety of rural-urban interactions require policy responses that are guided by broadly accepted principles at the European level and which facilitate regional and local strategies that are devised and implemented in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.

4. Implementation of strategies to achieve the ambitious goals for territorial cohesion contained in the report on *A New Partnership for Cohesion* will require more coherent (in the sense of fewer internal inconsistencies) spatial frameworks at European, national, regional and local levels, that explicitly acknowledge the changing nature of rural-urban interdependencies. There is also a need for much greater commitment to proactive models of multi-level governance in order to ensure efficient and effective coordination and integration of programmes and strategies at different spatial scales. In this context Richardson (2000) has noted a number of concerns about power relations in the new European discourse on spatial aspects of rural development as outlined in the ESDP.

In summary, strategic spatial planning provides a powerful tool for integrating the rural and urban domains. In order to facilitate effective responses to the challenges posed by emerging forms of urban-rural relations, spatial policies and planning frameworks must, (i) be guided by a rigorous theoretical framework and supported by robust empirical analyses based on much improved databases; (ii) seek to be spatially and socially inclusive by implementing actions that facilitate greater integration of supports for all residents of rural and urban areas in accordance with principles of sustainability; (iii) be supported by institutional structures to facilitate horizontal and vertical coordination within new governance models; and (iv) be capable of withstanding challenges from the political system which is prone to decision making likely to lead to short term outcomes that may be in conflict with the longer term goals of coherent and comprehensive spatial development strategies that aim to promote territorial cohesion.

<sup>2</sup> The Western Development Commission has made a number of specific proposals to assist employment growth in small towns in the western region. For further details consult Jobs for Towns – small and medium size towns in the western regions, WDC 2003, at [http://www.wdc.ie/db-files/Jobs\\_for\\_Towns\\_EN.pdf](http://www.wdc.ie/db-files/Jobs_for_Towns_EN.pdf).



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